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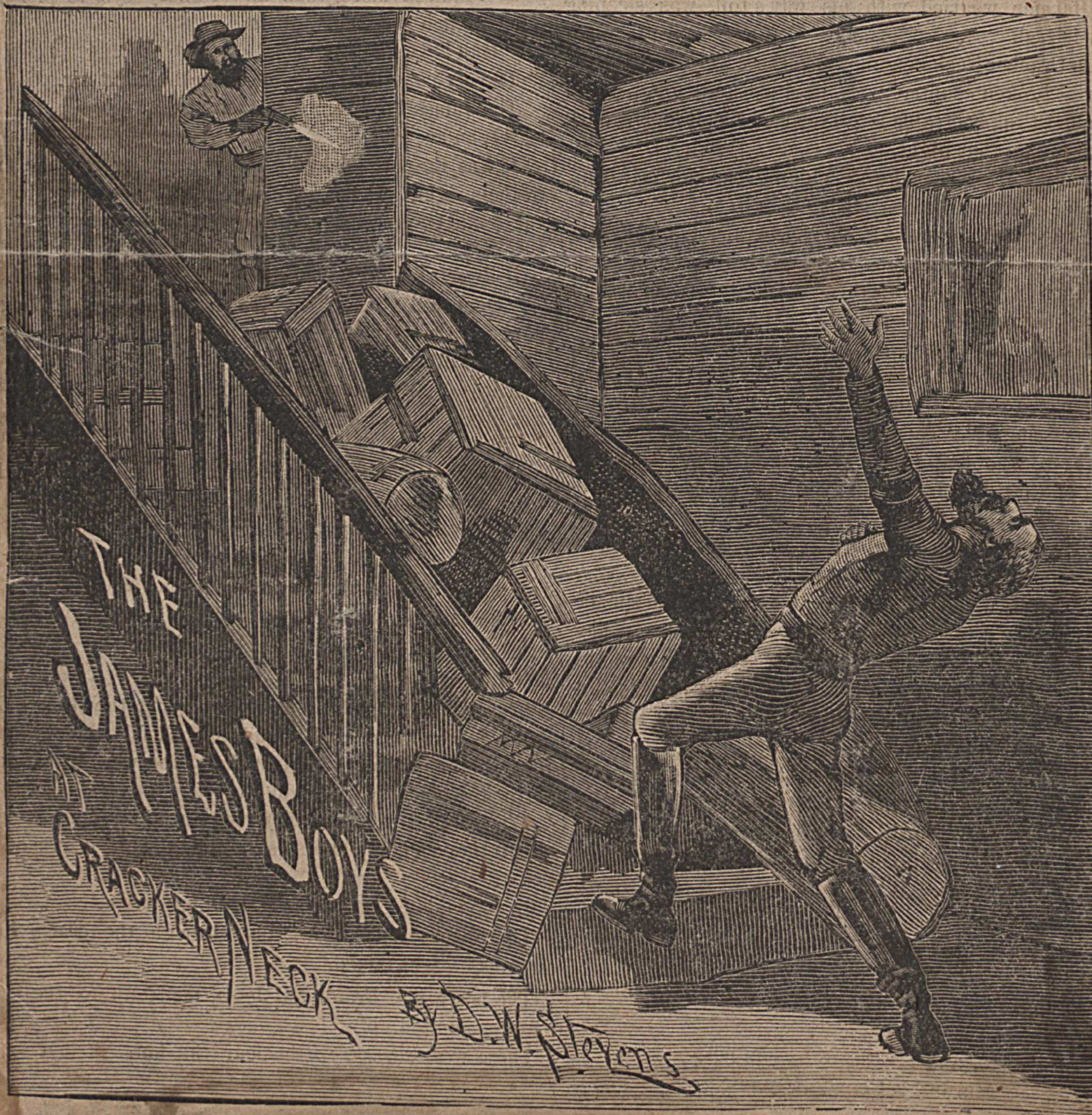
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FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOORE STREET, N. Y.
NEW YORK, June 7, 1882.

ISSUED EVERY WEDNESDAY

{ PRICE
5 CENTS. }

Vol. I



THE
JAM
POT
BOYS
AT
CRACKER
NECK

By D. W. Stevens

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The James Boys at Cracker Neck.

By D. W. STEVENS,

Author of "The James Boys as Guerrillas," "The James Boys and the Vigilantes," "The James Boys and the Ku Klux," "The James Boys in California," "The James Boys as Train Wreckers," "The James Boys as Highwaymen," "The James Boys in Minnesota," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE REUNION.

It was night. A delightful night in midsummer, when the whip-poor-wills sang their liveliest strain, and crickets chirped from beneath the old logs.

The farmer, wearied with his day's toil, was sleeping quietly in bed.

But in Cracker Neck neighborhood there were others astir. That wild broken country, with its hills and hollows, and deep, almost impenetrable forests looked silent, lonely, dark and terrible on that night.

Within its dark glades, forms could be seen moving about. They were men mounted on superb horses.

It was a grand night at Cracker Neck forest. The celebrated James Boys, who for two years had been in their cattle ranch in Texas, had returned, and were to meet their chums in their old forest haunts.

True, this announcement was not sent out broadcast, but a favored few of the friends knew of their return, and were prepared to meet them.

The poet sings: "There is no place like home," and to the outlaws who had spent two years away from the counties of Clay and Jackson, there was a longing to return.

There were warm hearts there to greet them, and their many little misdeeds were sure to be overlooked.

Two years away from their mother and friends made them anxious to return. Perhaps a desire to see a young lady of his acquaintance impelled Jesse to return to Missouri. It was a distant relative, a Miss Zeralda Mimms, not only educated, but a teacher in the public schools at Kansas City, who had won his heart.

Cracker Neck was the only safe hiding-place.

"We must have many friends to meet us, Frank," said Jesse to his quiet, awkward looking brother.

"I think so," was all the outlaw replied. Frank never uttered a long sentence. What he said was usually short, pithy and to the point.

"It will seem like old times."

"Yes."

"Has Payten Long informed all the boys."

"I suppose so."

"He promised to, and I suppose he will."

Jesse held the rein in his left hand and kept a pistol in his right hand.

It was a rule of the James Boys that they always had a faithful revolver at hand.

They were proceeding along the narrow path very carefully. Each held a pistol, and kept careful glances around the woods.

It required more than an ordinary eye to pierce the gloom which surrounded them.

"Halt!"

The cry came sharp and clear on the night air.

The James Boys reined in their steeds.

"Who are you?"

It was the old guerrilla cry, proceeding from the forest at their right. It may be that Jesse James smiled to hear the familiar challenge, but it was too dark for one to see the smile.

It is certain that Frank did not, for he never smiled.

"Quantrell," Jesse answered to the challenge, giving the name of that famous chief who had taught him the use of weapons of war.

It was the pass-word, for a moment later some one who was invisible said:

"Pass on."

The most singular thing about the James Boys and their unparalleled career, is that they had friends everywhere, and knew them by mysterious signs and pass-words.

Had it been a body of mounted police, who had suddenly run upon the highwaymen pickets, they would have fired into the bushes, and then charged.

They would without doubt have found only the empty forest and darkness for their pains.

There has always been a mystery about the James Boys which is wonderful. They and their friends knew when a pursuit was organized against them, and were prepared to throw the officers off the guard.

When told to pass on, they rode ahead for some distance, where they came upon a small clearing in the center of the forest.

In the middle of this was a small log cabin.

There were no windows, but through the cracks small streams of light issued.

The horsemen, Frank and Jesse, made up to the cabin and dismounted.

There were several horses near the hut, hitched to the trees.

No voice or sound came from those within the hut.

All was silence.

Making fast their animals, the James Boys advanced to the door of the hut and rapped.

"Who are you?" asked some one from within.

"Quantrell."

Again the mysterious sesame admitted them.

The door swung back and they entered.

"Jess, old boy, how are you?" cried one heartily, as he grasped the hand of the bandit king.

"All right, Dick Little! I hope I see you well?"

"Bully!" Dick replied, "and here is Frank, too. as I live. I'll be hanged, boys, if I was ever so happy in my life. Old Cracker Neck is again assuming a business air."

"How are you, boys, one and all?" asked Jesse James, grasping in turn the hands of Dick Burns, James Read, Buc McDonald, Ed. Miller, Hobbs Kerry, and Bill Ryan, who were in the small hut.

"We are all doing well," Hobbs Kerry replied, "only dying to see our old commander once more. Where have you been Jess, and why kept away from us so long."

"I have been in Mexico; Frank and I have turned ranchmen, and I'll be hanged if we haven't half a notion to live honest lives," said Jesse with a laugh.

"Well, well, well, Jess," said Dick Little, "is it possible that you are going to dim the luster of your own glory by turning ranchman."

"Only for a season, Dick," replied Jesse. "It does not hurt a fellow to turn ranchman for a season. You know one grows weary of running, fighting and hiding; then it is pleasant to have a good comfortable ranch in which to drop for security and rest."

"Yes, but you do not want to rest long?"

"Not very, Dick."

"Did you have any adventures in Mexico?"

"A few."

"Where?"

"You see we were in Texas, you know, on our ranch. A villainous greaser named Bustenado crossed the Rio Grande and captured a Miss Alice Gordon. We followed him over into Mexico, invading the foreign soil, shot Mr. Senor Bustenado, four-fifths of his men, and brought the young lady back to Texas."

"Aha, you had something then to quicken your stagnant blood."

"We did; Texas is a live country, and one seldom pines there long for an adventure."

"Did you do any professional work there?"

"A very little. We robbed a few stage-coaches, a bank, and sacked a town, which was about all."

"Very ordinary affair," said Dick Little, with a wink and a smile.

"Yes, very. Hardly worth mentioning."

"Well, you are back to Cracker Neck——"

"So it seems," interrupted Jesse.

"The same old wit," said Dick Little, with a smile.

"The very same," echoed half a dozen others.

"Well, let that go for just what it is worth," said Jesse.

"What else did you have to say, Dick?"

"How long are you going to remain with us?"

"That depends not a little on circumstances," he said.

"We shall be here as long as you can make it to our interest, and the infernal detectives will allow us to stay."

CHAPTER II.

THE HIGHWAYMEN AT WORK.

DICK LITTLE smiled at the remark of Jesse James. For a moment he was silent, and then said:

"I fear, Jess, that won't be very long, for you can't remain anywhere long without raisin' particular thunder."

Jesse smiled, and after a few moments of silence said:

"Well, Dick, it does seem as if we had the faculty of raising a row every once in a while."

"You still manage to keep out of the way of the sharks."

"Yes."

"Is Timberlake still on the search for us?"

"Yes."

"Curse him!" growled the bandit king, stamping his foot upon the floor. "He is the only man on earth I fear. I will give a thousand dollars to any one who will kill and murder that scoundrel."

"Oh, Jess," said Budd McDaniels, with a laugh.

"Why, Budd, what is the matter with you?" asked Jesse.

"You are not half so liberal as the Governor."

"Why?"

"He has offered a reward of five thousand for you, dead or alive."

"But he hasn't got me?"

"No."

"I'll bet five hundred dollars that I'll get the body of Timberlake before he gets mine."

"I hope you will."

"Have no fears but I will. Timberlake is a brave, determined man. He fears neither man nor devil, for he is both. Yet he will meet me once too often."

"It is almost useless to try to kill him," said Hobbs Kerry.

"Why?" asked Jesse.

"I have shot at him more than a score of times, and always failed to bring him down."

"A man who is to be hanged can neither be shot or drowned."

"Ha, ha, ha! Do you insinuate that he is to be hanged?"

"I see no reason why he should not be. A thief-taker is invariably the greatest thief of all."

"I hope there may be something in that," said Dick Little. "I hate Timberlake."

"Who does not?" Burns asked. "He would break up our own gallant band just for the reward he can get."

"Don't any of you become deeply impressed with the idea that he is invulnerable to lead or steel," said Jesse James. "Either will dispatch him."

"I hold to that doctrine," put in Ed Miller.

"And it is meself as would be after givin' him a thrial," said Bill Egan, a strong, athletic Irishman.

"Good for you, Bill; never get discouraged," said Jesse. "Timberlake is mortal, and though he may be fortunate a few times, he will inevitably fall beneath the unerring aim of some one."

"Well, Jess," said Ed Miller, "is there anything to be done to celebrate your return?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Well, boys, just to keep our hands in, we will perform

a little professional work to-night, though of such an inferior quality that we can hardly boast of any achievement."

"What work?"

"We will hail the stage which crosses Cracker Neck in an hour."

"That does seem small to men who are accustomed only to robbing trains and express cars."

"But it will just keep our hand in, and hold the old band together."

The highwaymen gave a little cheer that could be heard but at a short distance, and cries of long live the gallant old band escaped their lips.

"Boys," said Jesse, his bright, blue eyes sparkling with pleasure, "it does one good after such a long time to meet all the old friends here."

"All, Jess?" asked one.

"No, not all. There's poor Clell Miller, Bill Chadwell and Arch Clements dead. There is Cole, Bob, and Jim Younger in the penitentiary, but it does my heart good to meet so many, anyway. It seems like old times, and the world may yet learn that the gang of the James Boys lives."

The light was extinguished, the men left the hut and repaired to their horses.

Siroc, Jesse James' famous black horse, so renowned for speed and endurance, stood pawing and stamping the earth.

There were other animals blooded and possessing wonderful powers of endurance, yet none equal to the wonderful Siroc. Not a horse on the continent could equal him in speed, endurance, or privation.

Though he was ridden hard and but seldom fed or watered, he carried his master at the easy swinging gallop that seemed to defy pursuit.

There was a strange affection between master and beast. The sensitive animal seemed to know his master, no matter how dark the night.

He fought for Jesse, frequently charging among his enemies if Jesse fought on foot, biting, kicking, and striking all until he got to his master.

Then when Jesse was seated in the saddle, he flew like the wind till they were safe from pursuit.

Siroc, as well as his master, bore some marks of bullets. He had shed his blood for the master he loved so dearly, but not a single shot had been so serious as to impair his speed or endurance.

At the moment when the horse was wild and most furious a word from Jesse James was sure to make him quiet as a lamb.

The horses were unhitched from the trees, and the men vaulted in the saddles.

Jesse, as of old, took the lead.

Siroc seemed to realize his responsible position, and, proud to once more resume it, cantered forward with proudly arched neck.

Behind came the others of the band.

"Have you masks?" asked Jesse of Dick Little, who rode just behind him.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Good; it is better to use them, as it may save trouble."

On they clattered at a gallop, until they came to a creek, which they crossed on a bridge that spanned it.

"Halt!" said Jesse.

The entire band drew up.

"Now," said Jesse, "three or four of us will be enough to do the work. The others must act as a reserve force."

The question next arose as to who should be the reserve.

That question was settled by Jesse selecting Dick Little, Ed Miller, and Hobbs Kerry to act with him.

"The rest of you will retire among the bushes and await until I want you, if I should; I will sound my silver whistle and bring you."

Those men who were to act as the reserve did not seem very highly pleased with their position.

All would prefer the active scenes of outlaw life.

To the front, where there was danger, and death was liable to stare them in the face was the desire of all.

The greatest torture was the torture of inactivity.

But they were too well disciplined to murmur, and took their places up among the woods.

Jesse and Ed Miller took their station on one side of the road, and Dick Little and Hobbs Kerry on the other. Like statues cut out of dark stone they sat, invisible, three paces away, and silent as the grave.

The sound of wheels was borne to their ears. The old stage coach came rattling down the road.

The horses pricked up their ears, and the highwaymen drew their pistols, but there was no other movement.

Not the slightest sound escaped the dead calm which seemed to have settled over the dark forest.

Jesse held the rein of Siroc in his left hand, and though the noble horse was silent and motionless, he trembled with eagerness to be once more engaged in the exciting business his master loved so well.

The stage coach rolled down the hill.

"Halt!" cried Jesse, when the coach was opposite him.

"Stand, pull up, or a bullet!"

"What did you say?" cried the driver, reining in his horses and trying to pierce the darkness.

"Stand and deliver!" cried Jesse, riding out alone.

"What fur?" demanded the driver, evidently bewildered.

"To save your brains from being blown out!" thundered the highwayman, galloping directly under the driver's box.

"Take that!" cried the driver, aiming a blow at the highwayman's head with his whip.

Jesse James by a dexterous movement dodged the blow, the force of which was wasted in the air.

"Crack!" went Jesse's pistol.

A yell of rage and pain escaped the driver.

"You will be compelled to drive your coach with one hand," said Jesse.

The wrist of the driver was shattered with a bullet.

CHAPTER III.

NEWS OF TIMBERLAKE.

THE echoes of the pistol shot were still reverberating among the trees, as the sound of horses' feet were heard.

With a rush Dick Little, Hobbs Kerry and Ed Miller came up.

Hobbs Kerry sprang from his own horse and seized the leaders of the stage coach.

There was a wild plunging about, and it required all the iron nerve and sinew even of Ed Miller to hold the frightened horses.

"Are you hurt, Jess?" asked Dick Little. "Let me shoot the infernal scoundrel who done it."

"I am not touched," said Jesse James; "it is the man on the box who is on the stool of repentance."

"Who fired that shot?"

"I did."

"Crack!"

"Whiz!"

The shot was fired from the coach window, and the bullet grazed the head of Dick.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Jesse, Little, and Ed Miller discharged their pistols through the top of the coach windows.

Wild shrieks and cries of dismay went up from the coach.

"Are you hurt, Dick?" asked Jesse.

"No," was the reply, with a light laugh.

"Well, I suppose that some one in there is. Open the door and see."

"Oh, murder! murder! help! help!"

"Oh, I am killed! I am killed!"

"Don't fire any more in here, for God's sake!"

And a few more such cries issued from the stage coach.

Ed Miller sprang from his horse and opened the coach door.

"Stop that noise," cried Jesse sharply, striking on the door of the coach with the butt end of his revolver.

The yelling ceased and the groans became sobs.

"Now come out o' there and behave yourselves, or I'll have you all riddled with bullets."

There was silence a few moments, followed by a slight rustling, as some one made for the door of the stage coach.

"Now, if any one else attempts to make any resistance whatever, I swear I will blow the brains out of the last one o' you."

"Oh, no, sirs, oh, no! have no fears, we shall not make any resistance," said the voice of one feeble old man who was struggling to the door.

"See that you don't," said Jesse, seizing him by the shoulder and dragging him to the ground. "Search him, boys, and stand him aside."

It took but very few seconds for such experts as Ed Miller and Dick Little to completely strip the man of every dollar he had, as well as of all his valuables.

"Now keep still in there. Don't any of you be seen with a pistol or knife about you. If you are you will be killed, that's all," said Jesse James.

"Oh, we have none o' us got any arms," said one of the men inside in a whining tone.

"Be well enough if that was so, but some fired a shot," replied Jesse.

"Ready!" said Dick Little, indicating that they had fleeced their man, and wanted another.

"Next," cried Jesse, seizing a country-looking lad by the

shoulder and jerking him to the ground where he fell upon his hands and knees at the feet of the outlaws.

They seized him and in an incredible short space of time he was robbed of his last cent.

"Another!" cried the fleecers.

"NEXT!" yelled Jesse, seizing a woman and assisting her to alight.

"Take what I have gentlemen," she said. "It is all I have. I am now on my way to Kansas City to see my husband who is sick."

"What is your husband doing in Kansas City?" asked Jesse.

"He is a mechanic and went there to find employment. He fell sick, and I am on my way to see him. I have but fifty dollars to pay board and doctor bills."

"I believe you; you are a good woman to look so carefully after your husband. Here is a hundred dollars more. Go on and care for your sick husband. Boys, let her pass."

The command was of course obeyed.

Next came a man who insisted that he was poor and should not be robbed of his last dollar.

The bandit king seized him by the shoulder and turned him around, so the moonlight would fall upon him.

His clothes and air betokened wealth.

"You are a fraud," said Jesse James, and turned him over to his companions.

Upon searching him there was found upon his person the sum of three thousand dollars.

"I've a great mind to blow the top o' your head off," said Dick Little, his eyes flashing fire through his white mask.

"Oh, don't, please don't kill me," he whined, sinking upon his knees.

"Let the coward go," said Jesse, "though I firmly believe he is the man who fired at us."

Seizing the trembling wretch by the nape of the neck and coat-tail, Dick half hurled and half kicked him into the ditch at the roadside, where he lay more dead than alive.

"Served him right," said Jesse.

"Just what I say," an old woman said, stepping nimbly from the coach. "He's the rascal as done the shootin' an' come so near gettin' us all killed."

"I've half a mind to kill him, but I guess he's punished enough," said Jesse, regarding the trembling man as he lay in the ditch.

"No, no, let him alone," said the old lady. "He never grow any more, he, he, he!"

"Step aside, grandma, we'll not take any thing you've got," said Jesse to the old lady.

She thanked him very kindly and did as requested.

Then they were taken out one by one, and robbed by the experienced Ed Miller and Dick Little.

When all the passengers had been "gone through," the mail bags and express were ripped open and the contents taken therefrom.

"You can now all climb aboard," said Jesse James to the shivering terror stricken passengers. "Quick, I'll have no delay, or I'll commence firing upon all outside of the stage."

The man lying in the ditch half dead with terror was the first to spring to his feet and climb in the carriage.

He was followed by the others in such rapid succession that they almost tumbled head over heels into the coach in their haste and eagerness to escape the pistols of the outlaws.

The coachman wrapped a handkerchief around his wounded arm and drove away with his left hand.

"It's not so bad, boys," said Jesse, as he lifted the bag, into which their ill-gotten gains had been thrown.

The highwaymen who had been concealed in the woods now galloped out into the road.

"Danger is over and no need of reserves," said Dick Burns, as they rode up.

"Yes, we've got 'em all solid," Hobbs Kerry replied.

"Hark!" said Jesse.

His quick ear was the first to catch any sound.

Frank was next.

With his quiet even voice, undisturbed by any emotion whatever, he said:

"Some one is coming."

"Yes," said Jesse, "it's a horseman, and he is coming down the road at a rapid rate."

The horseman was near enough now for all to hear the thunder of hoofs.

"Whist, keep quiet!" said Jesse. "There is but one, and I am going out to see who he is, and what is wanted. Get within the shadow of the trees."

Jesse touched Siroc's flank, and he sped over the hills like a flash.

Jesse drew rein in the deep ravine upon the opposite side of the hill, at the roadside, and as the horseman came galloping by, Siroc leaped forward against the stranger's horse, and Jesse seized the rider by the throat, thrusting a cocked pistol in his face.

"Let go, you wretch," shrieked the strange horseman, trying to free himself.

"No, I won't," replied Jesse, coolly. "Stand, and deliver what few valuables you may have, you scoundrel."

"Hold!" cried the strange horseman. "You are Jesse James, I know your voice."

"Who are you?"

"Wood Hite, your best friend."

"By thunder, Wood, so it is, I came very near plugging you. Where are you going?"

"Started to hunt you up."

"What for?"

"To warn you."

"Of whom?"

"Timberlake."

"Does the villain know we are at Cracker Neck?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll not have an easy time. Is he coming?"

"He is not two miles away."

"Has he a large posse?"

"From fifty to a hundred."

whistle of surprise at the information Wood Hite had given him.

"Are you sure about it being Timberlake, Wood?" he asked.

"Yes, I know it is," the highwayman replied. "The facts are Timberlake has been kept pretty well posted o' late."

"Well, we're going to have some fun; Cracker Neck will be in an uproar before long."

"Are you alone, Jess," asked Hite.

"No, not exactly."

"Where are the other boys?"

"Oh, there's a dozen or more of them up the road in the woods."

"Well, we're not going to have any extra time to lose, because Timberlake is comin' on like a demon, and his men are like blood-hounds."

"Will you stay with us, Wood?"

"Of course, Jess; why do you ask the question?"

"I did not know whether you would or not, you have not yet been fully identified with the band."

"Well, if Timberlake comes on to-night, I will be," said Wood Hite. "I am going to let my pistol be heard to-night, and my bullets be felt."

The two wheeled about and galloped back to where the highwaymen stood gathered about Jim Cummins and Frank James.

"Hello, Jess, have you got him?" asked Jim.

"Yes, and who do you think it is?"

"Cannot say, Jess."

"Wood Hite."

"Wood Hite! why where did he come from?" asked four or five of the outlaws.

"What are you doing here, Wood?" asked Jeff Hite, his brother.

"I came to bring the boys news," was the answer.

"News? What news?"

"Of Timberlake."

"Timberlake, the sheriff?"

"Yes."

"Well, what of him?"

"He is after you."

"Thunder."

"Hades."

"Perdition."

"Fire and brimstone."

And many other such exclamations were uttered by the highwaymen.

"Well, boys," said Frank James, in his quiet, unassuming way, "if Timberlake is coming there is going to be some warm work."

"You can bet your life there will," said Jim Cummings, reining back his fiery steed, which pawed the earth and champed his bit in a restless manner.

"We haven't much time to waste here," said Jesse.

"What will you do, Jess, disband or stick together?" asked Jim Cummins.

"I think we had better stick together," said Jesse. "We can without doubt effect more in that manner."

"If it should come to a fight——"

"Then we should do as we have always done——"

"Fight?"

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE OLD MILL.

JESSE JAMES gave a low whistle. It was not a signal call to bring his gallant band around him, but a mere

"To be sure we would, and let Timberlake look out."

"We are all ready," said Jim, looking about over his little band. "Let's be going."

"All right, follow me," said Jesse, and wheeling his horse out into a by-path, rode away at a gallop.

The others followed after him in single file, for the path was too narrow and the trees stood too close together to permit riding double.

Down the narrow woods path the long file of men dashed, into a deep, dark ravine and through the forests.

The trees on either side seemed to tower up like huge giants. The moon shone brightly. There were no clouds, and but a gentle wind to stir the leaves of the trees.

"Where are you going, Jess?" asked Jim Cummins.

"To the old Mill."

"On Cracker Neck creek?"

"Yes."

"Why are you going there?"

"Because its an out-of-the-way place."

"How would it be in case of a fight?"

"Just the spot."

"Would we have an advantage?"

"Of course we would."

"We should be in the building. It is large enough to secrete us and our horses."

"We would doubtless have an advantage there."

"A great one."

"But they could besiege us and starve us out."

"We must not stay in it too long," said Jesse. "We will just drop in there, give Timberlake and his men a good, genteel licking, and then light out."

"How long do you think it will take to do that?" asked Jeff Hite, who was but a short distance to the rear of Jesse and Jim.

"If managed right it will take but a very few minutes. If there should be any blundering, it might be we would not be able to do it at all," answered Jesse, in a tone somewhat surly.

Jesse was subject to moods of surliness. His companions never heeded his moods. They knew he would soon be over them.

This interruption of Timberlake in the well-laid plans of the bandit king was enough to make him surly. He was secretly swearing vengeance against his old enemy.

Jesse had not returned from the sunny land of Mexico with the design of plunging at once into flame and steel. He had other motives.

Like all other men, he had a heart, and that heart must love as well as hate. He had met and loved Miss Zerelda Mimms. It was at the conclusion of one of his wildest raids.

A pistol-ball had pierced his right lung, and he was not expected to live. He was borne from place to place among friends until he was finally carried to the house of a Mr. Mimms. Here Zerelda, just budding into womanhood, became his nurse. Day and night she sat by his side, attending to his every want, and smoothing his pillow as only a tender-hearted woman can.

He learned to love the beautiful girl, and she, from pitying, grew to love the bold outlaw. The love of Jesse James was like his hate, it was strong as steel and had about the warmth of fire.

He would face a thousand deaths to meet Zerelda, and woe to the man or woman who dared to breathe a word against her.

Jesse's thoughts were of her, and how disappointed she would be when he did not come at the time promised.

"Curse that Timberlake," he muttered to himself, "he shall pay for this with his life. Why, in the name of the demon, can he not let me have one moment's quiet while in his jurisdiction?"

Strange question, indeed, for Jesse to ask. Why did he not let the public have a moment's quiet?

They were traveling now through a level woodland. The forest trees arose like giants on every hand.

"How far are we now from the mill?" asked Jeff Clarence Hite.

"It is just ahead," Frank James replied.

Even as he spoke, the small cavalcade galloped out into an open space.

A large, old, tumble-down building was about fifty yards ahead of them, situated on the banks of a creek.

CHAPTER V.

A SKIRMISH.

"THIS is the old mill," said Jesse, as they rode toward it. "It has not been used for years, and no one lives within miles of it."

"When was you in it last, Jesse?" asked Jim Cummins.

"It has been two years."

"Before you went to Minnesota?"

"Yes; but Jim don't mention the name of that accursed State. I would almost shoot my best friend for mentioning Northfield."

"I don't blame you, Jess, for there poor Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller, and Charley Pitts met their fate, and the brave Younger Boys went to a prison for life."

"Well, here we are," said Jesse, as they rode into the front entrance of the old mill.

"There is a place at the rear we can use as a stable," said Hobbs Kerry. "If we are going to stay here long we may want to dismount."

"We will dismount, you can rest assured, for the whole country is up in arms, and we will have to shake them off, or lay concealed until the bloodhounds have quit our trail."

The mill building was very large. It had been one of the largest saw-mills for miles around, and enjoyed the largest business. But that was ante-bellum days, and having become deserted during the war, was allowed to go to ruin.

The doors swung loose at the sport of the wind, and the siding was warped until there were great cracks between them.

There were numerous apartments and rooms in the old structure, which was two and a half stories high.

Every man and horse could have a separate apartment if necessary. The miller's family, his hands employed, and their families, had once lived in the old mill.

The horses were led into a rear apartment, which was large, and, having no floor, afforded an excellent stable.

Jim Cummins and Hobbs Kerry were ordered to remain outside upon picket duty. Hobbs Kerry was to watch at

the ford of the creek, while Jim Cummins was to ride back upon the road they had come for about two hundred yards.

"I do hope we may escape this time without a fight," said Jesse James.

"What, Jess?" said Ed Miller. "Is it possible that you, who never yet failed to meet the enemy with a shout of joy, want to slink away?"

"On this one occasion I must confess I do not wish to fight."

"We may escape yet," said Dick Little.

"Hardly," said James Read. "If that devil of a Timberlake is after us he will follow like a blood-hound."

"Well, if it comes to a fight," said Jesse, "we will go in with a will, and fight to win."

"Hark!" said Frank.

"What is it?" asked several.

"I hear horses' feet."

"In which direction?"

"North."

"North, then, they are, on Jim's side," said Jesse.

They all listened.

The sound of hoofs could be plainly heard coming through the timber. It was evidently a large body of horsemen, and they were coming at a sweeping gallop.

"It is as well we are fortified," said Jesse.

"It is," Frank made answer.

"We can give them a lively fight, break through and make our escape," said Jesse. "Shoot them down without mercy. If we manage to kill some ten or fifteen of the scoundrels the others will not be so anxious to follow us."

The steady roar of hoofs was drawing nearer each moment.

"They will soon strike Jim Cummins," said Wood Hite.

"Yes, they are——" began Bill Ryan.

"Listen," interrupted Jesse.

"Crack!" went a pistol.

The sound of hoofs stopped, and there was the shouting of many voices.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Rang out a volley of pistol shots, and the balls flew about the head of Jim Cummins.

"Crack!"

Another shot from the lonely picket.

One of the advancing horsemen fell, and his steed went galloping away, dragging the late rider by the foot.

"Down upon them, boys!" yelled Timberlake, who was trying to get the range of the man who had fired the shot.

"Crack!" went another shot.

The ball grazed the cheek of sheriff Timberlake.

"Fire, curse them!" roared the sheriff.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

No one man could withstand a fire so heavy as that.

The bullets seemed to fly thicker than hail.

The sheriff's men were all armed with revolving pistols, and each had a dozen shots without reloading.

They were not less than fifty in number.

"It's foolishness to wait here longer," said Jim, wheeling his horse about.

The sound of his horse's hoofs were heard as he thundered down the slight elevation toward the old mill.

"There he goes!" cried Timberlake. "Fire—shoot 'em down."

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

The bullets flew like rain around the retreating man.

One shot touched his ear just sufficient to inflict a slight sting and cause the blood to ooze from it.

"Curse you!" yelled the infuriated highwayman. "Some one will have to die for that."

Wheeling about with a pistol in his hand he fired.

One of the foremost men uttered a yell of pain and rage.

"Are you hurt, Joe?" asked the sheriff, reining in by the side of the wounded man.

"Killed!" he faintly murmured, and then sank slowly from his horse to the ground.

The advancing cavalcade paused around the fallen man.

Timberlake sprang from his horse to find the man dead.

The bullet had pierced his breast.

Jim Cummins galloped into the old mill, having brought on the skirmish.

CHAPTER VI.

A STATE OF SIEGE.

HOBBS KERRY had already reached the mill.

At the first shot he hastened to join his comrades.

"We may prepare for work that will be warm," said Jesse, who, from a position at the front window, was watching the sheriff and his posse.

"There will be trouble to get out of here," said Frank.

Jesse was silent. He was watching the foe.

"I fear, Jesse, that you've made a serious mistake," said Frank.

"How?"

"By being hemmed in here like rats in a trap."

"Have no fears but we shall escape," said Jesse. "We will give Timberlake a gentle reminder and skip out."

"Helloa, Jim," said Bill Ryan, as Cummins came in. "You got away all right?"

"Yes," replied Jim, leading his horse back into the second apartment which was used as a stable.

"How many are there, Jim?" asked Jesse James.

"From fifty to one hundred," said Jim.

"They mean fight?"

"Yes, they are red hot for it."

"How many did you hit?"

"Two."

"Did you kill any?"

"I think one if not both were killed."

Jesse went to the window to watch the movements of the foes.

"They are coming," he said. "All to places."

Instantly the windows, cracks, and crevices on the north side of the old mill were crowded with outlaws. Each held a cocked pistol, and only awaited the command of their chief to open fire.

The sheriff's posse was spread out in the form of a line. They seemed to understand that an enemy lay concealed behind those great old walls.

"Keep a close look-out," said Jesse James to his men.

There was no response.

The enemy came sweeping down, and the highwaymen knew that it would be sure destruction to be captured. With Jesse James, capture meant death; with the others, it was long penal servitude.

"Ready!" cried Jesse.

The steady, regular click of pistol-locks were heard.

"Aim!"

The pistol-barrels were presented and aimed at the advancing horde.

"Fire!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack—ack—ack—ack!"

The steady aim and volley told.

There were cries, shrieks, and groans came from without.

"Halt!" cried Timberlake, who had been untouched by the volley.

The bullets whistled close to his ears.

Amid the crash and roar of firearms, the fire and blood on every side, the sheriff did not lose his presence of mind.

"Fall back!" he said, in a voice in which there was not the least indications of fear.

"Keep out of the way of their shots," said the sheriff.

They wheeled about and galloped back into the shelter of the trees, leaving four men and two horses either killed or badly wounded.

"Reload every empty chamber," said Jesse to his men; "we shall need every shot yet before this fight is over."

The order was obeyed, and the highwaymen peered through the cracks watching the movements of Timberlake and his men.

The sheriff halted his men, and ordered them to dismount.

"Boys," says Timberlake, "we will have to use strategy to get those demons out, we can never charge a mill on horseback."

"I am hit!" said one.

"Where?" asked another.

"I think it's only a flesh wound through the arm," he answered.

"Who was it that fell at the first volley?"

"I don't know."

"Jim Weeks was one," said another.

"Was he killed?"

"No one knows."

"How many were shot down?"

"There were about twenty," said an excitable fellow, who was trembling like a leaf.

"No, thunder! not half that many," said another.

"But six fell," said Timberlake, "and two of these were

only stunned, and got upon their feet almost as soon as they were down."

"Two or three horses were killed," said another.

"Yes," said one of the men, "my horse was killed under me. He fell on my leg, and almost broke it."

"Did you walk back to us?" asked another.

"Part of the way I walked, and part of the way I crawled."

"Come, now," said Timberlake, "fall into line; we will advance on foot like skirmishers, and commence a regular siege."

The horses, eighty in number, were hitched to the trees, and the long line, the sheriff at the head, began to advance carefully upon the old mill.

The highwaymen, from their fortification, observed their movements, and prepared accordingly.

The besiegers divided into two bodies. One, under the sheriff's deputy, of about thirty men, came up from the northeast, while about fifty, under Timberlake, had worked around to the southeast, and were creeping up under the banks of Cracker Neck Creek.

"We've got to do some keen shooting," said Jesse, as he observed the movements of the enemy.

The sheriff's posse were protected by trees, logs and stumps. Those under Timberlake had the advantage of several ravines in addition.

The moon shone but dimly, for light, fleecy clouds had suddenly arisen, which, while they did not obscure the moon, dimmed its lustre.

Jesse consulted his watch. It was now just midnight.

There was work before them to do before the sun arose.

That little band of highwaymen must fight eight to one and, being the victors, escape before it was daylight, or they would be lost.

Jesse thought of his beloved Zerelda, and wished that he was with her then. Would he live through this struggle to meet her, or would he fall in it.

The command of "steady on the center" could be plainly heard.

"They are gettin' close on this side, Jess," said Jim Cummins, who with Wood Hite, Bill Ryan and Ed Miller, were watching the thirty men on the northeast.

"Open fire on them then," said Jesse.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Rung out the four pistols of the bandits.

A steady roar of firearms in answer came, and the siege had begun.

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING AWAY THE BARRIER.

No sooner did Timberlake hear the firing on the northeast, than he quickened the pace of his men, and moved well up the slight ascent, tolerably sheltered by trees, stumps and logs.

Many of the sheriff's posse had guns, while the highwaymen had only their pistols. These were, many of them, heavy dragoon revolvers, and carried almost equal to a rifle.

"Crack!"

It was a pistol fired from the old mill.

One of the sheriff's posse threw up his hands, and sank to the earth, a bullet through the head.

"Steady!" cried Timberlake, as the men began to waver. "Press up well under those windows and fire into them."

The single shot had been fired by Jesse James.

Jesse seldom if ever missed his mark, and the shot on this occasion had proved fatal.

Timberlake knew the desperate character of the men with whom he had to deal. Silken cords and toy balls would not do to play with them. It was a fight to the death.

"Be careful not to expose yourselves more than possible," he said. "Creep close up, keep well behind the stumps, logs and trees, and fire into the building. Shoot slow, and take good aim."

Better advice could not have been given.

"Crack!" rang out another pistol shot.

"Oh, Heavens, I'm shot!" cried one man, clapping his hand to the side of his face. A bullet had struck him on the cheek. The wound was not mortal.

"Go to the rear," said Timberlake.

The man covered with blood did as requested.

The fire was now returned.

"Crack!"

At first a solitary rifle, then:

"Bang, bang!" a double-barreled shot-gun.

Now it is growing warmer.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

A perfect blaze of fire along the entire line.

"Crack, crack, bang, pop!" comes the fire from the northeast.

It sounded not a little like a regular engagement, and those old hills and hollows rang with a music that had slumbered since the close of the war.

Within the highwaymen were cool and determined.

Shot after shot was returned.

They fired slow, yet with accuracy.

Each man within the mill was a sharpshooter.

In places, notwithstanding the moon, it was so dark that an object could not be seen down in the ravine or behind a tree.

Only the flash of a gun told where the attacking man stood.

They watched for these flashes and sent a bullet at the spot.

Sometimes it came after the man that fired the shot had sprang to cover, then again it struck the object for which it was intended.

Still forward step by step the attacking party pressed. Each moment the fight grew more hot, each moment danger thickened.

Blood was flowing without like water.

Men sank down at the roots of trees, behind stumps, logs, and into the tall grass with fatal wounds, to breathe out prayers or curses in their dying moments.

Others had fallen dead, pierced in the foreheads by deadly bullets.

All through the horrors of the fight, Timberlake stood unharmed.

By voice and act he urged the men on to deeds of greater valor.

In times of war when men are hardened to scenes of strife and blood-shed, it is nothing uncommon for charges to be made at the cannons mouth when death seems to stare the attacking party in the face; but in times of peace to suddenly call the farmers from their plows, the smiths from their anvils, the clerks from their books, to make soldiers at a moment's warning is rather difficult.

Such were the inconveniences under which Timberlake was forced to work. But Timberlake was a host in himself.

He would be worth a dozen ordinary men at any time, and his acts seemed to inspire the others with courage.

The great pest which for years had terrorized Missouri was now shut up in that old mill, and he was determined, if possible, to exterminate it.

"Courage, men, courage," cried the sheriff, when he found them begin to waver.

The lines were steady at the sound of his voice, and the men advancing, giving shot for shot.

Within the mill the outlaws were not faring so well.

Ed Miller, Hobbs Kerry, and Bill Ryan were shot. Bill Ryan lay on the floor, bleeding profusely from a shot in the face.

The other two, though suffering not a little, were firing as fast as they could reload their revolvers.

Jesse James made them keep all the chambers of one of their smaller revolvers loaded for an emergency.

"Owe!" groaned Dick Burns, clasping his hands to his side.

"What! Dick hit?" cried Jesse.

"Yes."

"Bad?"

"I'm afraid so," and he dropped his pistol and staggered half way across the mill room.

"Come back here, curse you!" cried Jesse, as the poor fellow, half crazy with pain, staggered away. "Are you going to desert in that way?"

"Oh, I'm killed!" he groaned.

"I'll finish you if you don't come back!" cried the bandit king, as he started toward Dick with a drawn knife.

"Let him alone, Jess," said Jim Cummins. "He's bad hurt."

"I don't care if he is; no man shall desert while he's eye-sight or strength to draw a trigger!" yelled Jesse, and he sprang toward the wounded man.

With a deep groan Burns sank to the floor, and by the time Jesse had seized him by the hair, was a corpse.

It became evident now that the sheriff's posse would soon possess the lower part of the mill house.

Bill Ryan was once more on his feet, and staggered away to the stairway. Barricades were put up at the two doors, but now the yelling posse was at them, and they were soon beaten down.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE UPPER STORY.

NEVER in all his life had Jesse James been in such a strait. The barrier was about broken away at both doors.

"We must go into the upper story," he cried.

"Then follow Bill Ryan," said Wood Hite, who had a slight wound in the face.

"What shall we do with Dick?" asked Ed Miller.

"Dick Burns?"

"Yes."

"Is he not dead?"

"Yes."

"Then let him lay. We've got enough to do to take care of the living, let alone the dead."

As rapidly as possible the highwaymen ascended the stairway.

There was not a moment to lose, for the barrier breaking away, the sheriff and his posse came in.

"Barricade the stairway," cried Jesse.

It was but the work of a moment to hurl half a dozen chests, boxes, and other furniture into the stairway, which completely blocked up the passage.

"Where did they go?" cried one of the sheriff's men.

"Thump, thump, tumble, crash!" came boxes and other things into the stairway.

"That ought to tell," replied Timberlake.

"They're up-stairs."

"Of course they are," said another.

"Rush up right at once, and knock 'em all on the head," cried one.

"Crack!"

Down went the speaker.

Looking up the stair-way a light column of smoke was seen to ascend.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

The sheriff's posse began to pour a volley through the door up the stair-way.

"Cease firing!" shouted Timberlake. "What is the use of wasting your powder and lead when you can do no harm?"

The men saw at once the wisdom of Timberlake's query.

The highwaymen above heard the command, and proceeded to complete the barrier they had begun on the stair-way.

Great boxes, doors, and lumber, was wedged in the stair-way in such a manner as to make a passage impossible, and also to render it difficult to get the way opened.

"How many are down there?" asked Jim Cummins.

"All the gang except what we have disabled," said Jesse.

"Jess," said Frank.

"What?" asked Jesse.

"I fear we have made a mistake."

"How?"

"We are caught?"

"Where?"

"Here, like rats in a trap."

"By whom?"

"Timberlake."

"Bosh, nonsense," said Jesse. "What use is there in disheartening the men."

"But suppose our second barrier was forced like the first what we do?" asked Frank.

"Simply go in the west room, take up a plank, drop down into the apartment where our horses are, and ride away," said Jesse.

"I had not thought of it, Jess," said Frank.

"I had, and prepared it from the first."

"You are sharp, Jess," said Bill Cummins, with a look of admiration. "Why, who'd a thought o' that?"

"Some one must see what friend Timberlake is up to down there," said Jesse. "He is keeping rather too still."

"I will go," answered Cummins.

He crept down the stairway as far as the barrier would permit, and listened.

The sheriff and his posse were gathered in the large apartment below, or at least as many as could do it. Some were still on the outside, watching the upper windows.

"I am goin' to do it," said Timberlake.

"—I don't believe it'll do any good. Jesse James is not the man to give himself up quietly," answered another of the gang.

"He may not," said Timberlake, with true generosity in his soul. "It may be he will be coward enough to fire on me even as I am offering him a chance for his life. But, nevertheless, it is no less my duty to do so. If we can save life we must do so."

He advanced, as he concluded the sentence, towards the lower stairway door.

Jim hurried back to Jesse's side.

"What is it, Jim?" asked Jesse, for he saw by the manner of the highwayman that some new event was about to transpire.

"They want to hold a parley with you," was the answer.

"Who?"

"Timberlake."

"With me?"

"Yes."

"On what?"

"On the question of our surrender."

"Our surrender?"

"Yes."

"They must be fools!"

"I don't know," said Jim Cummins, looking rather sheepish at the mention of surrender.

"Well, we'll not surrender," said Jesse.

"I think not, but——"

"I know not," said Jesse, with a firm interruption, "I'll shoot dead the first infernal man who mentions the subject."

"No body'd think o' such a thing, Jess, but give a feller a little time to explain. Would it not be well to hold a confab with 'em?"

"Why?"

"Delay 'em until we get the barrier strengthened."

"It might be a good idea."

"Knew it would," said Jim; "a few minutes delay now go a good way."

"Then keep a close watch out, I'll go down the stair-way for a few steps, and interview friend Timberlake on the important subject he may have to discuss. If my pistol should happen to go off and hurt him it would not be my fault."

"I hope it will," said Jim Cummins, "for curse him he is getting too much in our way; I hate him."

"I fear him," Jesse replied.

CHAPTER IX.

TIMBERLAKE'S OATH.

IF Jesse James feared Sheriff Timberlake he was the only man on earth the royal bandit did fear.

Reaching the top of the barrier, there was a niche in the winding stairway where he could stand and not be in the way of the boxes and rubbish the men were hurling down the passage.

"Jesse, Jesse James!" called a voice from below.

"Well, what will you have, Timberlake?" answered Jesse.

"Come down and see a fellow."

"Thank you, my friend. I have not time to spare," said Jesse.

"Now, Jesse, let's settle this matter without any further loss of life."

"I am willing;"

"I knew you were, Jesse. You certainly can't be so unreasonable and wantonly cruel as to wish men killed when nothing can be accomplished by it."

"I am not, Sheriff Timberlake, I give you my word for that."

"I knew it. I always said you would listen to the voice of reason."

"You were always right," Jesse replied, while a cunning smile played upon his face.

"We outnumber you, Jesse."

"So it would seem."

"Yes, we outnumber you at least ten to one."

"That is some odds."

"Very great odds. Now we have you surrounded."

"Do you think so?"

"To be sure we have."

"Well, what of it?"

"We could kill every one of you if we desired to."

"Such a thing is possible."

"Thump, tumble, crash!" came a heavy box, filled with brick, which had been taken from the upper chimney into the stairway, strengthening the barrier.

"What was that?" demanded Timberlake.

"A box fell down stairs," Jesse replied.

"Who threw it down?"

"I saw no one."

"How did it fall?"

"The attraction of gravitation may have had something to do with its falling," said Jesse, with a chuckle.

"You're too sharp, Jess!" said Timberlake.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm very dull indeed."

"Now look here, Jess, why prolong this fight?"

"No need on earth of it," said Jesse James.

"Whack, thump, crash!" came a huge piece of timber into the stairway, which filled up considerable space, and shook the building to its center.

"What was that?" asked the sheriff.

"A saw log fell down stairs, that was all," said Jesse.

"Look here, Jess, you are not playing fair."

"Oh, yes I am."

"No you ain't."

"Why, am I not?"

"You are strengthening your fortification all the time you are pretending to be negotiating for a surrender."

"Bump, bump, bump, bump—crash!" came a large round stone which was once a mill-stone.

It struck with such force as to crush in some of the boxes and furniture, shaking the old building even more terrible than before.

"You are very much mistaken, friend Timberlake," said Jesse.

"Oh, no, I am not."

"I very much fear you are."

"I know I am not."

"I am surprised that a man of your sagacity should allow himself to be so deceived."

"I am not deceived, Jesse James. I know you of old. I have known you too long and too well to be deceived by you."

"I thought as much myself at first, but have found out better since."

"Come, Jesse, there is no use in denying the fact, you are strengthening your fortifications."

"You certainly ought to know that I have not moved out of my tracks since we began our conversation."

"But your men are."

"My men are rather wayward fellows, and I hope you do not hold me responsible for their acts."

"But you are. Come, Jesse, what's the use of all this nonsense."

"There is no use of it."

"Let's quit shooting each other."

"I second the motion."

"Then surrender quietly, you shall not be harmed in my hands, have a fair trail, and justice be dealt you."

"I am surprised at you, Timberlake," said Jesse James.

"Why?"

"That knowing me so well, you should entertain any idea of my surrendering."

"Why, did you not say just now the killing could be stopped?"

"Yes"

"Well then how?"

"By you going away and letting us alone. We will not pursue you, and I promise that my men shall not fire one shot at you until you are out of range."

There was silence below, followed by the voice of Timberlake explaining the impudence of the highwayman.

There was a loud laugh from those below.

"What answer do you make?" asked Jesse, looking down through a stairway transom, he having climbed up on the barrier.

"We say you had better surrender to us," replied Timberlake. "It will save much loss of life."

"I am very sorry I cannot accomodate you," Jesse answered with a light laugh, "but, Mr. Sheriff, the facts are we are not ready to stretch hemp yet."

"There is no need in us having to kill you all," said Timberlake.

"I think it no use myself," said Jesse. "All you have to do is to turn around and go away. We will not follow you or attempt to indict you for what you have done."

"I cannot think of it," said Timberlake.

"Then good-bye!"

"Crack!"

With a sharp oath Timberlake fell.

The bullet Jesse had fired so unexpectedly had struck the sheriff on the cheek, ploughing a deep furrow, but not inflicting a mortal wound.

The sheriff's men gathered about him.

Was he killed, fifty voices asked.

Bryant raised him partly to his feet when the officer recovering his consciousness almost instantly, in a voice hoarse with rage, said:

"Curse you, Jesse James, for a treacherous, cowardly thief. I swear here, so help me Heaven, I will be pall-bearer at your funeral."

With a loud, defiant laugh, Jesse ran up the stairway, to where his men were assembled.

CHAPTER X.

THE ATTACK FROM BELOW.

FOR a few moments the rage of Timberlake knew no bounds.

Seizing an ax he battered in the door of the stairway panel by panel.

He paid no heed to the blood which streamed from his wound, rendering his face a ghastly sight to behold.

"Pull away the pieces as fast as they are knocked loose," cried the sheriff.

The men seized the pieces of the door as soon as they were knocked loose, and dragged them into the room.

When the door was all battered in, and the pieces all removed, they found they had just come to the real frontier, composed of boxes, beams, brick, stones, and heavy timbers, all wedged in so tight as to require some time to draw them out.

John Darlington seized a box and was pulling it out.

"Crack!"

John sat down for a moment with the blood spurting from

a small round hole in his forehead, and then fell forward on his face.

"Heavens! they have killed him," cried another of the posse.

"Drag him away!" cried the sheriff in a terrible rage.

"Curse them, I will have the last one of them, and they shall all hang for this."

A man sprang forward to seize the body of the dead man.

"Crack!"

"Crack!" rang out two shots, and with a wild death-cry he fell mortally wounded.

"Steady!" said Jesse James at the head of the stairway.

"We must shoot them down as fast as they make their appearance."

"Satan burn you!" roared Timberlake, "take that!"

"Crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack!" rang out the shots from the sheriff's self-cocking revolver.

But as he was not near enough to see the speaker above, his bullets of course only imbedded themselves in the door facing.

"Ha, ha, ha, fool!" cried Jesse James from the head of the stairway. "Coward, why don't you come up and fight like a man?"

"Curse you, come down and fight like a man!" roared Timberlake in a fury.

"I prefer to receive guests in my house," said Jesse with a laugh.

"We'll come in yet, never fear!" roared Timberlake.

Then signaling to half a dozen of his men armed with guns, they sprang before the stairway.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Bang!"

"Bang!"

"Crack!"

"Pop!" the shots rang out from below, and Wood Hite at Jesse James' side fell wounded with a buckshot.

The highwaymen were not behind them.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!" went three pistols from above, and one of the men below fell dangerously wounded in the abdomen.

"Help! help! oh, Heaven, I am killed," he groaned.

"Carry me to my home; send for a doctor. Oh, send for a doctor."

"He is hurt, boys," said Timberlake, as he observed the man holding his hand to his abdomen as he limped away.

He only took a few steps when he sank down.

The men sprang from the dangerous opening, where it was almost sure death to stand.

By the orders of Timberlake, the dead and wounded men were carried out into the open air.

"Oh, Heaven grant that daylight may come," said Timberlake, wiping the blood from his face and binding it up with his handkerchief.

He walked to the door and saw that the moon was not more than an hour high. He consulted his watch, and found it was two o'clock and ten minutes.

Calling one of his men to him he said:

Jake, mount your horse and go for reinforcements. Don't call for any of the people of Cracker Neck neighborhood to aid you, for, curse them, they are all in this affair together. Go to Kearney and telegraph to Craig at Kansas City to come and aid us with a regiment, if necessary."

"I'll go," Jake answered, doubtless glad to be in some other place than the front.

"Timberlake," said one of the sheriff's posse, "does it not occur to you that we can reach those fellows by firing through the floor?"

"How?"

"Get in the room directly under them, and then load our largest muskets with double charges, and shoot up through the floor."

"Joe your idea is a good one," said the sheriff, starting back. "Why did I not think of it before?"

He collected fifteen men, who were armed with minnie rifles and large muskets.

"Come in this room, directly under the highwaymen," said Timberlake.

The men followed him, and then he gave the orders for them to riddle the floor above the one where the highwaymen stood, with bullets.

Jesse was near the head of the stairs when:

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!" rang out a chorus of rifle and musket shots.

"Crash, whiz, zip!" came the bullets tearing through the floor where the bandits stood, but fortunately for them touching none.

At the same moment the attack at the front entrance was renewed with redoubled fury.

Shouts and yells went up from below, and the night was rendered hideous by the wild shrieks of the combatants and the sharp ringing reports of rifles, muskets and pistols.

"They are firing on us from below," said Jesse, as he observed the dozen holes where the heavy bullets had torn through the floor.

"Yes," said Frank, "and they have truly got us at a disadvantage."

CHAPTER XI.

MISS MIMMS TO THE RESCUE.

JESSE JAMES knew only too well the desperate character of the men they had to deal with, and Timberlake knew the stuff of which the highwaymen were composed.

The fertile brain of Jesse was not long in devising some plan to meet their dangerous attack.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Cover every bullet-hole with the muzzle of a pistol as soon as it is made."

As soon as Jesse gave the command, he clapped the muzzle of his pistol to the hole nearest him. The others followed his example.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!" rang out a volley from above, and those below found that it was raining lead upon them. Two were badly wounded, and one killed.

The James Boys and their followers kept up the fire, until the men below were compelled to desert the room.

"Keep up your fire!" shouted Timberlake, hoarse with rage. "Stand in the doors from safe places and fire diagonally. You may hit some of the infernal villains."

"Bang—bang!"

"Crack—crack!"

Rang out the muskets and rifles, the bullets nipping up through the floor, in one or two places knocking out great chunks of the wood.

"Good boys, your work is telling," cried Timberlake, who with considerable satisfaction observed the effects of the shots.

The attack on the barrier in the stairway was renewed with such fury that all Cracker Neck seemed to be alive with demons.

The ringing strokes of axes, crowbars and hatchets fell upon the ears of the beleagured men.

Jesse at once noted the progress of those at the stairway, and calling Ed Miller to aid him they sprang to the head of it with their pistols in their hands.

"Crack—crack!" went two shots from Jesse's revolvers.

"Crack—crack—crack!" three from Ed Miller.

They were men who, when inclined and with a fair show, seldom missed their man.

Two of the beseiging party fell at the stairway, and the others were only too glad to escape.

The attacking party was now driven from the stairway, but the firing from below continued with unabated fury.

The bullets whizzed constantly through the floor, and Jim Cummins was wounded in the leg, and several others had been nipped very close.

They fired back as well as they could, but the sheriff's men kept from directly under them, and their bullets were wasted.

"Jess," said Frank.

"Well?"

"We must get out o' here soon."

"We'll be out in an hour."

"But they have got the old mill surrounded, and may have possession of our horses now."

"No, they have not. They have been too intent on our capture, to think of our horses," said Jesse.

"Had we not better make some arrangements to break away?"

"All in good time, Frank," said Jesse, consulting his watch. "We have two hours yet before it is daylight, and one will suffice."

At this moment the firing was once more resumed from below. Great pieces of flooring were torn loose by the whizzing balls.

They pierced the flooring by dozens in spots not to exceed a foot in circumference.

The attack was at the same moment made upon the barrier below.

Shouts, yells, cries and the rattling crash of fire-arms made it seem as if a pandemonium reigned.

For a few moments the James Boys and their companions could only hug the walls closely, and keep out of the raging tornado of lead.

At this moment ladders were clapped up from the outside, and a dozen or more ran up to the windows and opened fire upon the highwaymen within.

This, however, proved to be very foolish on their part.

Jesse and Frank James instantly turned their revolvers upon the windows.

"Crack, crack!"

"Crack, crack!"

"Crack, crack!"

In regular succession, and with wonderful precision, rang out the shots in the face of the enemy.

Down, down the men and boys who had ventured to the windows upon the ladders tumbled.

Those on top fell on those below, until all rolled upon the ground, many of them bruised by the fall, and two or three slightly wounded by the outlaws' bullets.

Jesse and Frank sprang to the windows and opened a rapid fire from their pistols.

The attacking force there was glad to scamper away to the cover of trees.

As Jesse and Frank sprang back to the cover of the wall to avoid the oblique firing of the enemy, they heard a roar of firearms without which sounded like a battery of Gatling guns.

"What does that mean?" cried Jim Cummins.

"They are reinforced," said Frank.

Jesse, who had gone in the other room, said that a boat-load of masked persons were coming down the creek. There was not less than twenty.

"And," he cried joyfully, "they are firing on Timberlake. All Cracker Neck is up in arms to save us."

A shout of joy went up from the highwaymen, for they were in a desperate strait.

"Never mind, Jesse James," roared Timberlake. "I'll yet be your pall-bearer, never fear."

Jesse paid no heed to them. He was watching the figure of a beautiful girl standing erect in the bow of the large flat.

He recognized her as the girl he loved, Miss Zerelda Mimms. She headed a party of the best citizens in the Cracker Neck neighborhood and some big officials from a distance who came to rescue Jesse James. Of course they were disguised, but they carried trusty guns in their hands to defend the highwaymen.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

THE man had just gone down as the boat loaded with the Cracker Neck and other friends came into the bank.

Timberlake knew that it was dangerous to remain longer. Those were determined men, and he was disheartened anyway. He called off his men, and went out to their horses; they mounted and rode away.

The barrier was removed and Jesse James ran down at the head of his men. He caught the beautiful Zerelda and pressed her warmly to his breast.

"Darling, you came to my rescue like the true heroine that you are," he cried.

For a moment the beautiful girl was too much overcome to speak. Her large blue eyes were swimming in tears, and she bowed her beautiful head on the shoulder of the outlaw.

"Saved, boys, saved," cried Jesse James, as Frank, Jim Cummins, Ed Miller, and the others came down to the bank of the creek where the girl and her masked friends stood.

"Who have we here?" asked Frank, as he saw the masked men.

"All Cracker Neck," said one, removing the mask from his face, revealing the features of a justice of the peace.

Frank grasped his hand, and so did Jesse.

"You know me, Jess," said another; removing the mask from his face, revealing the features of a prominent editor and leading politician of the State.

"Oh, major, major, my dear old major!" cried both the James Boys, each grasping his hand. "You are true to us to the last."

"I will never desert men who fought with me four years," said the major.

Then came the unmasking of an ex-confederate colonel and the now leading politician of Missouri.

The James Boys grasped his hands warmly.

Then came the unmasking of a member of the Legislature and other prominent citizens of Cracker Neck.

No wonder the James Boys were allowed to live so long and carry on such deeds as they did, when they were encouraged and supported by the best and most powerful political men in the great State of Missouri.

The horses were brought out from the old mill, and the James Boys and their friends mounted.

Miss Zerelda Mimms was furnished a horse by one of the citizens of Cracker Neck, to lead the bandits to a place of safety, where Jesse and Frank James might rest secure for a few days.

Jim Cummins went with them, but the others and the Cracker Neck people, including the major and the colonel, all retired to their homes.

[THE END.]

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